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Future of renewable energy advocacy group in doubt

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By John G. Edwards

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The sun may be setting on the Corporation for Solar Technology and Renewable Resources, a 5-year-old nonprofit organization that sought to use solar energy to expand Nevada's economic development.

Rose McKinney-James has resigned as chief executive to become a temporary consultant to CSTRR and take a lobbying position. And the corporation's federal money is set to run out this year.

McKinney-James started work Tuesday as president of government affairs for Faiss Foley Merica in Las Vegas.

"I made a personal decision to move on and the board made the decision not to replace me," McKinney-James said.

With its future in doubt, CSTRR has been discussing the possibility of the Desert Research Institute or the Engineering School at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, taking over its role as an advocate for solar- and renewable-energy programs.

"If we're not successful (with the institute or UNLV),

then the board is certainly poised to bring CSTRR to a close," McKinney-James said.

"I think it's very important to have some successor organization to CSTRR," said Tim Hay, chief deputy attorney general with the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

Solar energy is environmentally friendly and could be part of the state's economic development, he said.

Hay, former legislative counsel to Sen. Richard Bryan, said CSTRR was an outgrowth of a study of solar energy that started around 1991 as a way to replace employment losses at the Nevada Test Site.

CSTRR was incorporated in 1995. Bryan is its chairman.

McKinney-James said the corporation has had successes. Pulte Homes started a solar water heating program in cooperation with CSTRR. The nonprofit group was the lead agency in Nevada for the president's Million Solar Roofs Initiative.

In the early years, Nevada Power supported solar power, but the utility in November turned its "green power" program over to the Desert Research Institute.

McKinney-James, a former Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor, persuaded the 1997 Legislature to require electric utility companies to get a small part of their power from solar and other renewable energy sources, starting with 0.2 of a percent in 2001.

CSTRR and energy giants BP Amoco and Enron Corp. agreed to participate in a 10-megawatt solar power plant at the test site - enough to power 2,200 homes. The Department of Energy signed a letter of intent to buy solar power from the plant, but the government agency backed out of the deal because of federal restrictions.

The uncertain future of electric utility deregulation in Nevada also created problems for the solar advocacy group, she said.

"Until we're able to build a broader basis of consumer interest in these technologies and reducing the costs, so they are competitive, it's going to be difficult to get them deployed," McKinney-James said.

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